

CALGARY PHILATELIST

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Begging Letters: An Unexpected Result Of The First Postage Stamp

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(see page 15 for list of committee chairpersons)

1999 BIRDS OF CANADA PRESS SHEET COMBINATIONS

by Georg Gerlach

On February 24, 1999, Canada Post once again issued a Press Sheet associated with its latest Birds of Canada issue. The 1999 Press Sheet has an identical pane layout to the previous two Press Sheet issues, and incorporates the new 46-cent domestic letter mail rate. Unlike in previous years where 10,000 Press Sheets were printed, Canada Post issued only 6,500 Press Sheets in 1999. Of these, 5,000 were unsigned and sold at face value while the remaining 1,500 were signed and numbered. As in previous years the signed sheets were sold at a premium. The reduction from 8,500 unsigned sheets to 5,000 suggests that a significant quantity remained unsold last year.

The latest Press Sheets were once again printed in a 3 horizontal by 2 vertical sheets of 20 stamps each format. In addition, all the Press Sheets have the stamp colours printed on the top and bottom selvedge as colour bars. The latest Press Sheet has a very large selvedge border on the upper part of the sheet and as such it is unlikely that any of these will be found on cover. However, one never knows.

My interest in the Press Sheet issues revolves around postally used gutter pairs and recognizable Press Sheet combinations on cover. It is hard to estimate how many Press Sheets will be broken up to create gutter pairs and blocks, but with the reduced number of Press Sheets being sold I would estimate that less than 200 or 300 of the unsigned sheets will be broken up. This is a very small number, and I have estimated the potential number of various combinations that could exist if this number of Press Sheets were in fact broken up (see Table 1).

Quantities of the various 1999 Birds of Canada Press Sheet combinations.

unsigned Press Sheets	5,000 issued
signed Press Sheets	15,00
Total	6,500

Assuming only about 250 of the Total will be broken up by collectors to obtain gutter pair and block combinations, the following represents the quantities available.

[continued next page]

Table 1

gutter centre blocks (2 per press sheet)	500
vertical gutter pairs (Northern goshawk)	250
vertical gutter pairs (Sandhill crane)	250
vertical gutter pairs (Red-winged blackbird) with colour dots	750
vertical gutter pairs (American goldfinch) with colour dots	750
horizontal gutter pairs (Northern goshawk-Sandhill crane)	2,000
horizontal gutter pairs (Red-winged blackbird-American goldfinch)	2,000

In addition, there would be a total of only 250 matched sets of large 'corner blocks'. My estimate of the number of vertical gutter pairs assumes that all the gutter centre blocks are left intact.

As can be seen from the summary in Table 1, the quantities are extremely small. I have further assumed that most will remain MNH and that only a very small number will be cancelled. Of the 250 Press Sheets that I've assumed might be broken up, I believe that fewer than 20% of these stamps will be cancelled. Still fewer will be used in period and remain on cover. In period, for me, represents the period within the first year of issue or until a rate change occurs, whichever comes first.

This issue on cover has the making of a modern rarity. Given that these combinations are obtainable at face value, it will not be long until the Canadian catalogues price them. As the case with the two previous issues, their scarcity will no doubt mean high prices in the coming years for good used (with discernible date) as well as on-cover material. I have yet to hear of or see any of this type of material offered for sale and I would be interested in hearing from anyone who has. [Editor's note: Correspondence to Mr. Gerlach can be forwarded to him via the editorial address at Box 6830.] Some combinations will likely be found on less than 30 covers if even on that many. Even the common horizontal gutter pairs will likely be used on fewer than perhaps 100 covers.

As a result of the revised postal rates, the use of these combinations on mail both internal and external is not as simple as it used to be but it is still possible. Unlike during the past two years, these combinations will now need to be supplemented with the low-value definitives in order to pay the various international rates.

As of January 1, 1999, the overseas letter rate rose to 95 cents (less than 30 grammes) and thus lends itself to the use of all the gutter pairs plus the 3 cent definitive to pay the proper rate required. Used gutter pairs can be obtained on oversized envelopes mailed within Canada to pay the new 92 cent postage.

Gutter blocks and corner blocks can be obtained postally used on heavier letters to overseas destinations where the new rate is \$2.45 for 50 gramme to 100 gramme items. It is also possible to use these combinations on registered or special delivery covers. Thus, getting these gutter pairs and combinations on cover, having paid the correct rate, while difficult, is certainly feasible.

Other interesting items will be covers with individual or pairs of stamps having the selvage with colour bars attached. Such stamps will most likely be from the bottom, left, or right selvage because the upper selvage is much too large except for the largest envelopes. Selvage with colour bars have long been popular with collectors in other countries and offer another variation for collecting stamps from this issue. Even stamps from the left and right edges are distinguishable from the normal stamps because they have a white bar on the wide selvage.

It will be interesting to see whether the Darnell and Unitrade catalogues capture these combinations, mint, used, and on cover. There is no doubt that gutters and combinations from this latest Press Sheet will be scarce and much sought after by collectors in the coming years.

DISPLAYING YOUR COVERS AT HOME

by Denise Petty

Many a stamp collector has favourite covers that they like to take out and admire often. Such covers are mounted in the usual way on album pages. Some collectors will frame sheets of stamps or covers and use them as wall decorations. The cost of frames can run into good money. It may be difficult to justify framing items in this manner, especially when the material is inexpensive.

There is a easy way to display covers that I have found, by using refrigerator magnets. Slip a magnet inside a cover, stick it on the fridge, and you can admire your cover without the fuss and bother of having to go into the stamp den and get down an album from the shelves. You can also mount a metal plate (covered with fabric or suitable paper) on the wall and then add or subtract covers from the display as you change interests.

If you smoke, or the kitchen is used for a lot of cooking that produces fumes or condensation, the covers will suffer. It might be better to add some kind of glass or plastic overtop to protect the items, although this will bring you back to the expense of frames. Make certain that the material will not fade from exposure to sunlight.

BEGGING LETTERS (PART 1)

by Dale Speirs

Introduction.

Most philatelists think of the year 1840 in terms of the introduction of the postage stamp, but there was more to it than that. The greatest impact of Sir Rowland Hill's reforms was not the postage stamp but rather revised cheaper postal rates and more efficient methods of operating the post office. This triggered off unexpected consequences, one of which was a plague of begging letters.

Beggars have been with human society for thousands of years, and as long as people give them alms, they will continue with us into the future. One specialized type of beggar that flourished in the Victorian era was the begging letter writer, who would send pleading letters to suitably chosen victims. This is the subject of this essay. The modern letter from charitable organizations, a legitimate type of letter, is not considered here. The begging-letter writers seldom had any truth to their appeals for alms.

Begging letters are known as far back as 1542 [17] and circa 1750 [12], and while common enough before the postal reforms of 1840, increased considerably with the advent of cheap postage after that date. Prior to the reforms of Rowland Hill, letters were always sent postage due, and thus many people refused to accept letters from unknown persons as a matter of course. There was also hand delivery, which had its vagaries and hazards but was sometimes successful, as witness the case of a beggar in 1785 who: "... contrived to throw a letter into the courtyard directed to the Duke [of Northumberland], the contents of which were that Peter L___y, Esq., late of Maryland, stood among the crowd of beggars for charity". In about an hour a servant opened the gate and called out "Peter L___y!", who then went into the house, and the Duke enquiring into the cause of his misfortunes, made him a present of thirty guineas." [41].

It had been thought that compulsory pre-payment of letters would discourage begging letters, but this was not so, since the postage was a minor expense compared to the return from gullible marks. In a poor piece of prophecy the Earl of Lichfield commented in 1838 that: "It is the practice with many persons to refuse to take in twopenny-post letters, and many, who do not give that order, take in a vast number of letters of no use to them, begging letters, and all sorts of letters, none of which would find their way into the post, if there was anything to be paid in advance ..." [36]. By 1869 it was remarked [42]: "Impertinent letters are often best unanswered, and it would take a fortune in penny stamps to answer all the begging letters one receives."

It's A Living.

Begging-letter writers were usually drunkards, and cared little about anyone but themselves [20]. Beggars can be literate. That skill is not incompatible with vagrancy or alcoholism. With the spread of literacy in the 1700s and 1800s, some beggars chose a different method of operation rather than panhandling in streets where one is subject to personal abuse. It was remarked in 1846 that: "*Your beggar epistolary is a living commentary on the evil of education. It enables the vagabond, when personal admission was sure of opposition, to get his petition into your house edgeways through a crack in your door.*" [35].

It could pay well to write letters en masse begging for relief. One enquiry in 1815 showed that many beggars earned their entire living by writing begging letters or soliciting subscriptions to books never meant to be published [1]. There were two classes of begging-letter writers. Those with literary imagination invented characters and a detailed story. Others simply listed their misfortunes and asked for money [21].

An interview with a begging-letter writer who lived off the proceeds of such for two years brought forth the comment from the interviewer [2]: "*If the charitable could but see, as we have seen, whole packets of letters in the same hand, but each setting forth a different catalogue of misfortunes, found on the same practitioner, and intended to be used, like some medical prescriptions, prout occasio postulet, the very sight of a begging letter would, at once, freeze their charity, however warm it might be.*" One begging-letter imposter detained in 1835 (because he was blind staggering drunk down a street) was discovered to have on him a packet of numerous begging letters addressed to distinguished ladies such as Viscountess Howick and Lady Fane [54]. He had, it was revealed to the court, a previous conviction for begging letters.

"... the fabrication of such letters is a recognized branch of the thieves' business.", remarked one commentator [5]. Another observer wrote: "*It is curious to watch the gradual deterioration of conscience which seems almost invariably to follow the making of money without work.*" [21]. An 1874 investigation of a gang of more than 50 begging-letter writers showed they averaged £5 per week each [32], a good wage in those days.

The beggars had their own side of the story. Many agreed that those who condemned the morality of begging letter writers were living in glass houses. Wrote one in 1843: "*True it is, that I obtained money by professing to be what I was not. Well, sir, I can place my hand upon my heart, and looking loftily around me, ask of men in the highest places if they have been a bit more scrupulous in*

their way to advancement?" [44]. A begging-letter writer of 1849 who signed himself Mendicus was moved to reply: " ... *I am a begging letter-writer, 'imposter' Mr. Horsford would call me, and I am not ashamed of the calling ...* " [39]. (Horsford was with the London Mendicity Society, a charity which dealt with beggars.)

Although beggars tended to specialize, many used all forms, from street panhandling to letter writing. It was not necessarily the case that a beggar wrote only letters and never panhandled in the street, or vice versa. An 1845 court case revealed that one beggar, caught out for telling a vicar a false story at the manse, had a previous record using many different stories. He was noted as having once been caught years ago in possession of a begging petition [50].

How To Write Good.

The earliest known advice on how to write a begging letter dates back to 1621 in England [47]. The recommended method was that: " ... *the letter must be divided into foure partes. First, wee must get the goodwill of him to whome wee write by praising his liberality, and specially of the power and authority that hee hath to grant the thing that hee is demanded. Secondly, we must declare our demand and request to bee honest and necessary, and without the which wee cannot atchieve our determinate end and purpose. Thirdly, that the request is easie to be granted considering his ability, and that in a most difficult thing his liberality is ordinarily expressed. Fourthly, to promise recompence; as thanks, service, &c.*"

Another method of begging-letter writers was to write flattering letters in the hope of getting an author's book or other item, then converting the gift into cash: "*A man publishes a book, and the begging letter-writer is down on him with requests for a present of a copy. A young author may be flattered, but a more experienced hand knows that his 'History of the Berbers' will be promptly converted into an equivalent in gin, which by no means represents the money value of the volumes.*" [16]. An American judge, Benjamin Cardozo, received a letter: "*Dear Judge Cardozo, I read in the newspapers that you are a liberal judge. Will you send me ten dollars, as I'm really very hard up.*" [51].

Beggars varied their style of letters as the public became inured to the old ones. In the 1860s, for example, the popular theme was to beg not on behalf of one's self but someone else who was too proud to say anything and preferred to remain nameless [8].

Although beggars generally wrote their own letters, there were some who relied on public scribes, who, from long experience in writing personal letters for

illiterate clients, knew how to turn a deft phrase. Some public scribes did nothing else: "*High-fliers, or begging letter-writers ... scribble false statements of their having been unfortunate in business, or suffered great losses, which have reduced them to a state of extreme distress. In London, but especially in the watering and sea-bathing places, these letters procure as much as from five shillings to one pound per day.*" [3]

Choosing A Target.

Begging-letter writers used directories and newspapers to select their victims. Beggars shared names of gullible marks, and if one responded to a letter, then a flood of other letters arrived [27]. An investigation of a gang of more than 50 such writers showed that they had 34 directories with 3,000 names marked. Codes were used before each suitable name to indicate their suitability [32]:

- = doubtful or not called on before
- x = likely to give
- * = very likely to give
- o = has given recently

Beggars also read the newspapers to track the whereabouts and doings of their victims, usually the fashionable people and nobility, and the better to match the story of the begging letter to the individual being targeted.

A directory called the *CLERGY LIST* was quite popular with beggars [7]. Newspaper obituaries were often used to hit up families of the deceased [9]. Anyone with an ethnic name or obvious country connection would be appealed to. The Royal Scottish Hospital, in London, England, received numerous letters from beggars claiming to be Scots [22]. Some of them probably were, but all of them were beggars working under false pretenses.

A Catalogue Of Victims.

The general favourites of begging-letter writers were fashionable, well-to-do people with time and money on their hands, and probably a guilty conscience. An example was one letter writer hauled before the Marlborough Street Court, London, in 1832, named Patrick Moran, alias Murnan, alias Stewart, alias M'Kittian [55]. The list of his victims included Lord De Roos, Captain Elliott, the Hon. Mr. Fitzroy, M.P., Sir Thomas Hardy, Sir Frederick Ponsonby, Mr. Freshfield (son of an M.P.), Squire Alexander Baring, and others unnamed.

Members of Parliament were a favourite target on the belief that they were fearful of losing votes by not assisting their constituents in dire need. One M.P. complained that since taking office he had received numerous begging letters from such people as: "... *three decayed curates, two deserving but destitute authors, four promising theological students, a society for the suppression of improper photographs ... and a musical young lady from South Wales.*" [18].

Newspaper editors were targeted by begging letters, if not for cash, then for the publicity in the letters-to-the-editor column. In 1959, on the occasion of the dissolution of the London Mendicity Society after 150 years, the editor of *THE TIMES* (London) remarked that in 1821 his paper had given the Society L20 because the paper got so many begging letters [23,24].

[to be continued]

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PHILATELIC FICTION REVIEWS

by Leanteri Polvikoski

Review of POST OFFICE by Charles Bukowski. Originally published 1971, 36th printing in 1997 by Black Sparrow Press, ISBN 0-87685-086-7, trade paperback \$16.50 at Indigo or Chapters.

This is a novel about working for the United States Post Office in the 1960s and early 1970s. The narrator is Henry Chinaski, an alcoholic womanizer whose incompetence at organizing his life leaves him drifting from one bottle to the next and one woman to the next. Drunks have to get their money from somewhere, so Chinaski ends up holding a variety of jobs in the Post Office. He starts off as a substitute letter carrier, beginning with the Christmas rush season, then eventually getting on permanent. Later he gets on as a mail sorter, where he spends more than a decade slotting letters into cases.

Along the way there are boss-from-Hell stories, although given Chinaski's behaviour and absenteeism, one is inclined to sympathize with the boss. But not entirely, for Chinaski is kept partly on the booze by the bureaucratic procedures he must put up with. Working 12-hour shifts every day, but expected to do training on one's own time. Being required to sort a tray of mail in 23 minutes, regardless of how much mail is in the tray. Having a stopwatch held to him for breaks and washroom visits and being written up for being a minute over.

Bukowski writes from the rowdier side of life, so this novel is not for those with delicate tastes or to be given as a Christmas present to that 10-year-old niece who you want to encourage to collect stamps. The book flows along in an episodic narrative flow that is quite readable, and quite funny in places.

Review of THE CHALON HEADS by Barry Maitland (Orion Books, 1999, ISBN 0-75282-470-8,). Trade paperback, available at Chapters or Indigo. Most philatelic fiction uses rare postage stamps as what Alfred Hitchcock referred to as the McGuffin, an object sought by the protagonists but which could be anything. Most novels involving stamps use them in this way, and with a click on the find-and-replace tab in the spellchecker, the stamps could be replaced by coins, Ming vases, or an alien artifact without altering the story.

THE CHALON HEADS makes better use of philately, as stamps are a major part of the plot, set in London, England. Eva, a young woman, has been kidnapped. Her elderly husband Sammy Starling receives a ransom note franked with Chalon heads, stamps of the Queen Victoria era. He collects them; Eva strongly resembles the young Victoria depicted on the stamps. An unusual ransom is required, with payment demanded in the form of a rare Chalon cover coming up at auction. Starling must liquidate his entire fortune, including his stamp collection to buy that cover. The ransom payout goes wrong, Eva is murdered, and Starling's unsavory past is illuminated in detail that leaves him humiliated and vengeful.

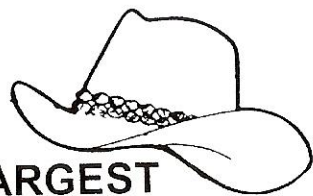
No one is surprised to learn that Eva was not a faithful wife. It turns out she was a cocaine addict, and paid for the habit by arranging for a master forger to sell Starling fake Chalons of excellent quality and taking a commission. Stamp dealers and auction houses are dragged into the mess. What goes on in the upper-class auction houses and dealer shops will not surprise any experienced philatelist, just as the behaviour of art galleries brings a cynical smile to the lips of a Neoist.

The police investigation reveals a link to a past murder. The usual suspects are set up and knocked off in the traditional manner of police procedurals. This murder mystery reads quite well, with a deft bit of mis-direction about who murdered Eva. The slowly-revealed history of the Chalon head forgeries subtly distracts the reader from the murderer's trail.

CALTAPEX 1999

(Notice the Y2K compliant title instead of '99)

Thanksgiving weekend this October 8 to 10 will be the last Calgary stamp show of the 1900s (not the last show of the millennium, which doesn't actually begin until 2001). Minaz Ramji (280-0770) is Chairman of the event, which goes at the Coast Plaza Hotel, 1316 - 33 Street NE (formerly Marlborough Inn). Dealer bourse, exhibits, banquet, club tables, and all the usual enjoyment at the show!



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MEETINGS AND SPECIAL EVENTS FOR 1999

September	1	General meeting
	1	Deadline for October bulletin
October	6	General meeting
	8 to 10	CALTAPEX
	20	Auction
November	3	General meeting
	3	Deadline for December bulletin
	17	Auction
December	1	Christmas social

MEETINGS and AUCTIONS are at the Kerby Centre, 2nd floor, 1133 - 7 Avenue SW, at 19h30. Auction lots should be in before 19h30 to allow bidder viewing

CALGARY REGIONAL GROUP OF BRITISH NORTH AMERICA PHILATELIC SOCIETY meets on the second Wednesday of the month except July and August. For details about meeting places and times, contact Ed Harris at 274-0021.

CALTAPEX is at the Coast Plaza Hotel (formerly Marlborough Inn), located at 1317 - 33 Street NE. Details from Minaz Ramji at 280-0770 or Doug Kollar at 547-3838.

SUNDAY BOURSE is at Rossarrock Community Hall, 4410 - 10 Avenue SW, from 10h00 to 16h00. For details and table rentals, call Phil Wolf at 259-8750.

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